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Gardening. American and Russian style.

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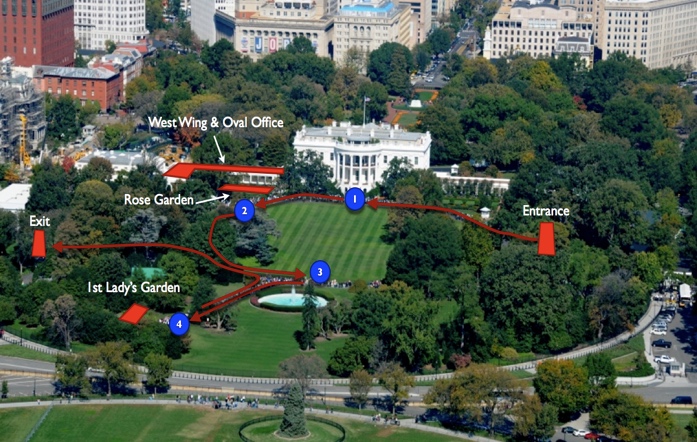
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Introduction

Gardening is a widely spread activity both in the United States and in Russia. Millions and millions of people on two opposite continents count the days left till the spring – a beautiful season in each year which makes it possible to plant a tiny seed in the soil, care much about it like a genuine child during few mounts and be generously awarded for the great efforts with a plant of a dream at the end. Isn’t it wonderful? Isn’t it worthwhile? Is it a peaceful hobby for older people or a plain necessity for growing the food for people of any age if they have tough time? There are some controversial issues in the theme dealing with the gardening trend and we are going to make it more familiar and understandable.

The White House Garden

It is very surprisingly to know that many American people in big cities and towns would willingly rent or borrow a plot of public land on which they would like plant a garden. Gardens in the United States are springing up everywhere. A highly advertised one thrives even on the south lawn of the White House in Washington, D.C.

During World War II, First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt established a victory garden at the White House. Nearly six decades later, another vegetable garden has sprouted on White House grounds to promote First Lady Michelle Obama’s project of reducing childhood obesity by encouraging youngsters to eat a healthy diet loaded with fresh fruits and vegetables.

Fifth graders from Bancroft Elementary School in Washington, which has had its own garden since 2001, have helped Mrs. Obama dig and tend the garden and harvest the produce. The students also worked with chefs in the White House kitchen to prepare and cook what they had grown. Some food from the garden found its way into formal White House dinners and the Obamas’ family meals; the rest was donated to a local kitchen that serves the homeless.

The garden featured 55 varieties of vegetables, some from seeds handed down from the third American president, Thomas Jefferson. All plants were grown organically. Mrs. Obama, who noted that the project was inspired in part by her desire to improve her own children’s diet, said, “The garden is an important introduction to what I hope will be a new way that our country thinks about food.”

 It is worth saying that nowadays for the great part of the American nation gardening is no longer a rural or suburban pastime. It is a mordent trend in urban living. City dwellers without yard space are gardening in containers, on rooftops, or in those prized community plots. According to a survey conducted by the National Gardening Association, 83 million U.S. households participate in some type of gardening activity.

While Americans are as eager as ever to decorate their homes and yards with attractive landscaping, more and more gardeners are looking to the practical aspects of gardening—raising plants for food and choosing easy-care ornamental plants that are friendly to the environment.

Growing Our Own Food

In times of national crisis, self-reliant Americans have looked to the garden as a source of food. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, millions of people planted “relief gardens” in yards or on any vacant piece of land. During World War II, 20 million “victory gardens” provided fresh produce for the home front and freed up food supplies for the war effort.

It’s not surprising, then, that the current economic decline has raised interest in edible plantings, including vegetables, herbs, fruit trees, and berry bushes. In the National Gardening Association survey, 34 percent of gardeners said the recession was motivating them to grow their own food. The Association estimates that a well-maintained food garden yields a $500 return when the gardener’s investment and the market price of produce are taken into account.

For some gardeners, raising their own food is a lifestyle choice. With doctors and the government telling how much is important the consumption of fruits and vegetables to struggle obesity and lower the risk of cancer, heart disease, and diabetes, some people see the backyard garden as a short way to healthier eating.

An added advantage is that home - grown food is of superior quality. Fruits and vegetables that ripen on the stem taste better than those that are artificially ripened and spend weeks in shipment before they reach the table. While commercially grown produce is often polluted with unknown amounts of chemical substance and pesticides, gardeners can guarantee the safety of what they grow themselves.

Creative approaches to gardening ensure that more Americans can enjoy the experience of growing their own food. Mixed-use gardens in which vegetables such as beans, squash, and tomatoes are hidden whereas the blooms in a flower garden are increasingly popular. Raised bed gardens contained within wooden, stone, or plastic frames give gardeners complete control over the quality of the soil and make it possible to create a productive garden over even the most unsuitable solid. Thanks the beds' raising the complicated and difficult work bending over a lower garden became easier and more convenient. Another popular gardening method—planting vegetables in pots—creates a mobile garden that can fit in limited space and take best advantage of changing light, moisture, and temperature.

Urban Gardening

A surprising amount of gardening is taking place among the concrete, glass, and asphalt that define the urban landscape. A large number of different websites, magazines, and innovative new products is available to assist the newcomer to urban gardening. Recent trends include:

**Community gardens.** The most significant trend in urban gardening is the tremendous interest in community gardens—public spaces where individuals or groups can grow their own food and flowers. According to the American Community Gardening Association, some 18,000 such gardens have sprung up around the nation. Suitable plots are in great demand with American dwellers and they simply disappear in days or hours, and cities and towns struggle for finding additional space to accommodate the demand. Community gardens are managed in various ways, but the Lower Macungie community in eastern Pennsylvania is typical. For about 10 dollars, a resident can rent a 30-foot by 20-foot space on land that is ploughed in spring by the local public works department. Gardeners fill buckets from a nearby water tank to irrigate their plants during the growing season. Those who need assistance can take advantage of free seeds and gardening programs offered by the local government. The community gardening experience sometimes encourage city residents to improve the entire neighbourhoods and make them neater. Such was the case in a crime-ridden section of Philadelphia after a group of women reclaimed a vacant lot to create a garden. With help from the city and a local horticultural organization, residents began to clean up graffiti, install new trees along the streets, plant flowers in containers and window boxes at their homes, and hold community festivals and gardening classes for kids. One of the most dangerous areas of the city was transformed into an attractive, safe neighbourhood. Indeed, studies in a number of cities have shown that where greenery increases, crime goes down.

**Schoolyard gardens.** The interest in community gardening has affected the schoolyards, where children are learning how to grow their own nutritious fruits and vegetables as well as how to look after the environment. Tens of thousands of schools have established gardens, greenhouses, and school- yard habitats that enrich learning. A wide variety of organizations, from the National Arboretum in Washington, D.C., to the California School Garden Network, are helping young people develop a love of gardening.

**Container gardening.** Plants rooted in standing pots, hanging pots, and window boxes can transform a patio, porch, or apartment balcony into an instant garden. Some adventurous souls enjoy giving almost anything that will hold soil—used tires, wine barrels, leaky buckets, even shoes—new life as a plant container. Trendy products on the market in recent years include hanging pots from which tomatoes grow hanging upside down. Vertical gardening kits enable gardeners to grow climbing vegetables, flowers, and vines in a sliver of soil to create a living wall.

City rooftops are increasingly popular sites for container gardens, which can provide both fresh produce and a pleasant oasis for a building’s habitats. Even some hotels in New York City and Chicago are growing vegetables, herbs, and fruits in containers on their roofs to supply their trendy restaurants. More ambitious individual gardeners and some corporations choose green roofs in which the entire roof surface is covered with a growing medium planted with vegetation. Such living roofs benefit the environment by reducing rainwater run- off and significantly lowering energy use for air conditioning.

Eco-friendly Gardening

Gardeners today are eager to work with nature instead of trying to master it. As they pursue their hobby, they seek practices and products that leave a minimal influence upon the environment. Eco-friendly gardeners are especially interested in:

**Less lawn.** Maintaining a beautiful expanse of green grass around one’s home requires chemical fertilizers, pesticides, and frequent watering. Regular lawn mowing uses energy and pollutes the air. The solution for many homeowners is to reduce the amount of lawn or replace it altogether with low growing ground covers, ornamental grasses, a vegetable garden, wildflowers, or easy-care perennial flowers and shrubs.

**Native plants.** More gardeners are turning to native plants that are already adapted to local conditions and thrive with less fertilizer and water than non-natives. Exotic, or introduced, plants not only require more maintenance but also can spread uncontrollably, crowding out native species and upsetting the balance in the ecosystem.

**Water conservation.** A new status symbol for the smart gardener is a rain water container next to a home to collect water for the garden. Because collecting rainwater reduces customers’ outdoor water use and reduces storm water runoff, many municipal water departments are handing out free rain barrels and providing simple instruction to help homeowners construct their own for as little as 40 dollars.

**Attracting wildlife.** Gardeners are purposely planting flowers and bushes that provide food and habitat for butterflies, hummingbirds, and other wildlife. Organizations such as the National Wildlife Federation (NWF) encourage other simple measures such as supporting old flowerpots as homes for mosquito- eating toads or growing small low bushes to provide cover for wildlife. Over the past 40 years, the NWF has recognized nearly 150,000 private yards, schoolyards, businesses, and places of worship as Certified Wildlife Habitats.

Of course, lush gardens sometimes attract too much wildlife, especially deer, whose populations have risen in the absence of natural predators. Garden centres and catalos are full of deer repellents and supposedly deer-resistant plants, most of which are ineffective in deterring the determined animals.

Urban Gardening in Russia

Among the world’s major countries, Russia is the one where urban gardening is the most widespread nowadays. Family urban agriculture is a real wide-scale phenomenon that involves a large portion of city-dwellers. A substantial proportion of garden plots have small houses where it is possible to stay overnight. A significant number of these plots are located in allotments.

Most city-dwellers with a garden plot use all or part of the plot for vegetable produce. However, these are essentially multifunctional spaces that answer multiple needs of individuals and families. The small garden house, where people can stay overnight, is an important component of this multifunctionality. If a plot has a house, then it is a dacha. The term dacha, dating back to at least the eleventh century, has had many meanings; from “a landed estate” to the rural residences of Russian cultural and political elite. Since the 1940s, the term “dacha” has been used more widely in Russia to define a garden plot of an urban citizen. This is when the urban populations began to rapidly expand their garden plots to provide food for themselves, their families and neighbours.

Spaces for food production and vacation

Among the gardens that do not have overnight shelter, there are individual gardens located next to people’s primary residence. Also some vegetable gardens created in the crisis period of the 1980s and 1990s do not offer overnight shelter; the number of such gardens is currently declining.

The garden with its small house is a space that can be used in many ways depending on the needs, desires, and constraints of the users. These needs vary with age, family composition, and income. In periods of financial difficulty, vegetable growing is the priority, and the plot can supply a substantial portion of a family’s food. In other times, vegetable production declines in favour of holiday functions (rest, recreation, restoring one’s health, freedom to do what you want, strengthening family ties), but vegetable production can be increased again if necessary. This ability to manage multifunctional land according to household situation and needs gives the society greater flexibility.

Plots in allotment gardens and vegetable gardens range from 300 to 1,000 m2 in size. Most gardens have 600 m2, hence the term *cheste sotok* used in everyday language. Russian people managed to plant on this not big square literally huge or industrial scaled harvest and secure themselves from lack of vegetables till next season. On an average plot of 600 m2, there is a strawberry field of 60 m2, 17 raspberry bushes, 19 currant bushes, 11 gooseberry bushes, 13 apple trees, ten plum trees. Researchers calculated the figure of the harvesting of 500 kg of vegetables, half of which is potatoes, this covers the needs of a family of four for these products. Besides potatoes people cultivated tomatoes, cucumbers, onions and greens.

Due to its scale and its multifunctional potential, this urban gardening is thus a phenomenon that penetrates deep into the Russian society. It is not a panacea for all difficulties. But it is a practical resource that people use to find solutions for many problems. It extends human habitat for a large portion of the population.

Share of the non-market economy

On the rough estimation dacha gardening accounts for about 3% of the arable land used in agriculture, but grows an outstanding 50% by value of the food eaten by Russians. According to official government statistics in 2000, over 35 million families (approximately 105 million people or 71% of the population) were engaged in dacha gardening. These gardens provide 92% of Russia’s potatoes, 77% of its vegetables, 87% of the berries and fruit, 59% of its meat and 49% of the milk produced nationally.

Despite their significant contribution to the national food economy, the majority of dachas mostly function outside of the cash economy, as most dacha gardeners prefer to first share their surplus with relatives and friends after saving enough to feed them through the winter, and only then look at selling what remains. A few will sell the remainder at local markets, and move into a small market production model for extra cash.

The function of dacha gardens goes well beyond their economic significance, because they serve as an important means of active leisure as well as a way to reconnect with the land. Traditional economic calculations fail to realize the true value and benefits of a dacha garden. Currently, the food production is declining in favour of holiday (vacationing) functions. Clearly, a wider viewpoint is needed to realize all of the benefits! Time spent in the garden is seen as relaxation, education, entertainment and exercise – all in one. Food production is a very valuable bonus.

Basically, this urban gardening is a non-market activity mainly for home consumption. In fact, during production periods, selling is permitted on roadsides and around official markets. Harvests also give rise to gifts and local exchanges. Most Russian gardeners share fruit, flowers, and medicinal plants with relatives, neighbours, and friends.

In the most common cases, these gardens grow vegetables, flowers, medicinal plants, fruit trees, and berry bushes. Men devote their time primarily to building and maintenance, while women prepare the produce and do canning. Men, women, and children work the garden and do landscaping. This is the ideal place for do-it-yourself, recycling, and ingenuity.

Geography

Allotment gardens were created throughout Russia, from the city of Arkhangelsk in the far north to the southern Caucasus. They are found in all climate zones and in nine time zones. A small portion of allotment gardens is located within cities. The vast majority is in the periphery, sometimes dozens of kilometres away.

Bus and trolley bus lines allow for easy access to allotments located within or near the city. Most other allotments are close to railway stations. The automobile is used more and more frequently. In Kazan as in other cities along rivers, it is possible to take a boat to reach allotments located on the opposite bank of the Volga. Despite of possible long distance between the flat in the town and the cheste sotok people are used to overcome every week’s trips and do it on the regular basis.

Conclusion

Though a list of different economic, social, and cultural differences between Russia and America could be practically endless, there is striking similarity in how — during the times of hard- ship — Russians, Americans suddenly recall where their food is coming from and turn to their local soil for support. The so-called “victory gardens” in the U.S. during both World War I and World War II look extremely similar to their Russian counterparts. Both in the USA and in Russia during the 1930s and 1940s, food gardens were viewed as important parts of national policy.

Nowadays the gardening movement in the USA plays a great role in society as people discover many benefits from gardening. The benefits are not limited only to the production of food, and American enjoy he same range of benefits as in Russia, including economic (increased food security), social (creating a better feeling of community and interaction), personal (serving as a means of being closer to nature), and health (improving the quality and availability of the food supply and involving gardeners in beneficial physical activities).

Taking into account all mentioned above we can say that people are quite the same regardless the country they live. And they are found of the same joyful hobbies, for example, the gardening. Some people are enchanted by the beauty of colourful flower petals, some are fascinated by growing the healthy vegetables. According to the official data the number of people engaged in gardening is about 35 and 65 percent of the whole population in the USA and Russia accordingly. And the drivers of doing gardening are slightly different. In the USA people are more concern about their health and care much about the quality the food they eat. They even agree to plant and consume their own food as they are absolutely sure in its quality. People in Russia do gardening for grand variety of reason. Planting, maintaining, harvesting, canning, transporting and storing products, as well as building and maintaining fences around the small house and other facilities, takes a lot of time. It seems nobody object this way of wasting time. On the contrary, people adore their dachas, gardens, cheste sotok and so on. They are willing to have a picturesque spot where they can rest a little or spend a whole vacation. During tense times it is a good opportunity to enhance the families and support them providing with plain vegetables and fruit.

It is interestingly to mention that in America Russia’s experience is considered as a positive and successful model of how food gardening even as a leisure activity can be highly beneficial and productive. One quotation from the book about gardening in Russia published in the USA may present this positive outlook of many Americans: “Essentially, what Russian gardeners do is demonstrate that gardeners can feed the world – and you do not need any GMOs, industrial farms, or any other technological gimmicks to guarantee everybody’s got enough food to eat. Bear in mind that Russia only has 110 days of growing season per year – so in the US, for example, gardeners’ output could be substantially greater. Today, however, the area taken up by lawns in the US is two times greater than that of Russia’s gardens – and it produces nothing but a multi-billion-dollar lawn care industry.”

On the contrary Russia may implements American educational schemes for schools and kindergartens which raise positive attitude to the environment and children’s’ sense of responsibility of “being green”. The experience of urban gardening, and roof gardening in particular, may also meet significant demand and readiness to do among older population living in cities.

Resources

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